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### Postmodern Reinvention

“A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged... by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work.” (Baker, 41)

Postmodern art is anything but traditional. Aesthetic experts carry little weight in the postmodern arena, as the “handyman” steps up to take the title. The handyman, working with only what is already at hand, uses pieces of traditional imagery to redefine notions previously engrained into viewers. The aim of postmodern art is to take pre-existing systems of representation (or symbols from within them) and engage (or confront) the audience in a new and redefining manner, estranging objects previously know. Postmodern art brings the audience close to the animal by implementing various techniques, such as using found art and vivid animal imagery (including the gaze), to make the audience think ‘with’ the animal.

Taking from the *the Cat and the Dog* (Baker, 106), we find the two most common pets of America sprawled out on the wall. The fact that these animals are so familiar to us makes the piece more effective. That is, the imagery plays very much off of pre-existing symbols in our heads. The dog looks strangely like TV icon Lassie, and the cat reminds me of President Clinton’s old cat. While not everybody who sees the piece has to draw the same conclusions, the animals are nonetheless familiar to anybody who has seen a cat or a dog (basically everyone). However; I do think the more intimate the connection between viewer and subject is, the more the piece hits closer to home, so to

speak. Elements of familiarity amplify the effectiveness of a postmodern piece. As these elements fuse with new elements that challenge our original understanding of the subject, comportment is redefined.

In my piece, *Assimilation*, it ends with the gaze of several animals seen later in the film. After having seen the many contacts that humans experience with these animals earlier in the piece, I thought introducing the gaze towards the end would somehow bring the audience closer to the animals, hinting at the possibility of emotion rather than a purely mechanical existence. The beginning was meant to highlight an assimilation of species into the human umwelt. That is, it brought attention to the control that man forced onto these animals in order to benefit himself – a very mechanical portrait of man and animal. Slowly the tone changed to a less dominate relationship between man and animal to illustrate mutual relationships. For example, the relationship between dog and man came up frequently towards the end (dog is “man’s best friend”). The dog has lived alongside man for quite some time now and despite man’s immense control over the species, dogs are rarely treated like cattle and discarded to benefit man. Including the gaze of cats and dogs with cattle and sheep towards the end was intended to associate the emotions man understands from cats and dogs with other types of animals that man has contact with. In a sense, I attempted to reconfigure the audience’s relationship with the herded.

Derrida spoke of the animal’s gaze. He states that the gaze creates a sense of self-identity (the “I”); as we are looked upon, we acknowledge that we have been acknowledged, giving us a worldly presence. If you notice, the eyes are wide open on both the cat and the dog. They are blankly staring off into the exhibit, almost at their

viewers. So this piece takes another element of familiarity (the gaze of a cat and of a dog), and confronts the audience with a gaze. The familiarity is quickly skewed as we realize that the bodies of the animals are nothing but their hides. The gaze no longer comes from a creature that is acknowledging us and our presence in the world, but rather from inanimate and rather ghostly representations of cat and dog.

Staying with the cat and dog piece only a moment longer, I would like to note the instance of botched taxidermy. Their taxidermy is botched because they're missing their bodies. Had the bodies been present, the piece would have lost most if not all meaning. When something is taxidermy, it is expected that it will represent the animal in a seemingly natural way. That is, good taxidermy is flawless in its reapplication of the hide; everything goes in its place (even the final position of the animal, which is often typical of the animal while it was living). Taxidermy's aim is to recreate nature in the form of a three dimensional still life. Through documentaries, books, and various other forms of media, nature is made familiar to us. Symbols are adopted as the world is revealed to us through these various mediums. The nature of botched taxidermy challenges these symbols. Botched taxidermy brings attention to its imperfections, by contrasting what is expected by the viewer and what is presented by the taxidermy. Mistakes in taxidermy (and postmodern pieces for that matter) lend to the notions of dismissing the expert. As Baker states, "If taintness, imperfection and botched form count for anything, it is that they render the animal *abrasively visible*, and that they do so regardless of how the artist thinks about animals." (Baker, 62) He speaks of the postmodern animal as being a disconnect from what is expected in the minds of the viewer. There is a certain dissonance as the viewer expects no flaws, but instead is

forced to accept them as with botched taxidermy. The viewer expects one thing, and gets another. Comportment is disrupted, further confronting the viewer.

The haunting creatures on the wall almost remind me of costumes. As if Lassie was another type of dog and had to put the costume on for the show. Hence the new title I gave it, *Haunting Costumes*. Also, it points to the concept of skin being a superficial zone of contact – good for visually comprehending and categorizing something, but bad for truly understanding a being's nature.

Taxidermy and photography are closely related. A photo of a taxidermy polar bear could be mistaken for a photo of a real polar bear quite easily. Both a photograph and taxidermy piece represent a moment in time. The polar bears in the London exhibit are framed as though they were frozen in states of action; always attacking something or walking. This affect contributes to the sense of authenticity of a presence before the exhibit – much like *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (Baker, 62).

Found art, as found in the polar bear exhibit and *a fly* has a connection to a past reality. The actual found art had to have been found somewhere; implying an existence before the exhibit. The piece thus possesses a connection to reality and all the objects it has interacted with in that reality; including animals (as in the case of *a fly*) and nature.

In each unique picture within *a fly*, we can find evidence that points to the presence of a being in a familiar house setting. Sometimes (most of the time) its hair or fur that implies it is, in fact, a cat or a dog. Not only does it imply the presence of such an animal, but it provokes thought as to what that animal looked and lived like. We expect the animal to be there, but it is not; only remains. Our minds have seen all the

pieces to this puzzle before (of course not everyone can say they've seen such a scene before, but I am assuming for the sake of argument). The center of the piece (the animal) is absent, challenging our comportment, demanding that our minds fill in the blank.

A lot of the art we have been studying relies on a sense of audience participation. While the participation may be involuntary or subconscious, most of the art pieces access and manipulate the audience's understanding of the world. As postmodern art latches on to bits of worldly truths, it also challenges these truths by confronting audiences with unnatural inclusions, often bringing us closer to the animal. I like to think of postmodern art as a remixing of reality. The aesthetics of most postmodern pieces are somewhat unimpressive to me; however, I have learned it isn't beauty that allows a postmodern piece to leave an impression, but rather the relationship between the viewer and the subject.

## Bibliography

Baker, Steve. The Postmodern Animal. London: Reaktion Books LTD, 2004.